THE ASSIST COURSE PLAN
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The ASSIST project has its own website to be found at:
http://www.tjorn.se/inenglish/projects/assist/
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1 Introduction

1.1 SAMO

The ASSIST course is based on the Sagene Model (SAMO), which was a structured in-service training model. SAMO was developed and implemented in Sagene, a district in Oslo, the Capital city of Norway. Evaluations of SAMO have suggested that this has been a successful way of enhancing the competence of its employees in a cost efficient way.\(^1\) Two preconditions for this success may perhaps be traced back to a highly motivated leadership with common goals and values in relation to the project.

The values and theoretical understanding within SAMO have been implicit. The ASSIST course is a more formalized version of SAMO, where goals, values and theoretical grounding are more explicit. Hopefully this will contribute to the same success factor as in SAMO: That leadership and participants have common goals and expectations to ASSIST.

The basic structure of the ASSIST model is: Classroom teaching and small “homework” tasks, both being discussed in mentoring groups. The classes are held by leaders within the organization. This contributes to keeping low costs, which is a central value in this in-service model. In addition, this contributes to learning and development for the leaders holding the classes.

The course is given to staff with and without higher pedagogical education, yet the target group of ASSIST is staff without higher education. The training is both offered to staff who have entered the course, and to other staff groups who would like to participate on one or several classes. In this way the ASSIST training may be a resource to a whole district.

1.2 Background and aims

Kindergarten/ pre-school assistants and teachers perform an increasingly important role in the upbringing of children. Not only in caring for children but also in promoting learning and development. The competence of the staff in understanding and interacting with the child, as well as gaining the confidence of parents, is important. Therefore the human capital is the most important part to guard and to support in a project like this.

At the same time we know that most “assistants” have little or no higher education. The turnover is high and sick leave among this group is high compared with staff with higher education. In addition we can notice from statistics\(^2\) that there will be a lack of staff in kindergartens/ pre-school institutions in many countries in Europe, unless something happens now. The OECD-report “Starting Strong II” stresses the need of well qualified staff as the key to quality services.

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It also underlines the need to improve working conditions and education of staff working with early childhood education and care: “Attention to the level of recruitment of early childhood workers, their professional education and work conditions is a key to quality services.”

The overriding objective of the ASSIST course is to improve the qualifications among the kindergarten/pre-school sector, in particular staff with little or no higher pedagogical education. In addition the ASSIST course has two long term objectives: Improving stable and long-term employability of kindergarten/pre-school assistants and improving the attractiveness of being a kindergarten/pre-school assistant. Having completed a successful ASSIST course, the employees will have developed their professional competence both in terms of meta perspectives on their work and their capability to reflect critically over practice. Changes like these may be related to the long term goals in ASSIST, as mentioned above. An evaluation report from “KOMPASS”\(^3\), a similar project to ASSIST in Norway, showed that the participants reported changes which may influence them in becoming more stable and long-term employed within the kindergarten/preschool section. The participants who had attended the KOMPASS training reported: An increase in their; motivation, involvement and enjoyment in the job. In addition they reported about an increase in their consciousness about their own role in the institution, a development in their theoretical/reflective competence and an increased motivation for learning more.

The fact of having the possibility of gaining more knowledge and receiving a certificate which documents the degree of formal competence may also contribute to improving the attractiveness of being a pre-school assistant. A certificate from ASSIST may be used in relation to negotiations about salary and when applying for new jobs/roles. The mapping of felt training needs among kindergarten/pre-school assistants with little or no higher education showed that only 29\% reported that they had good or pretty good possibilities of gaining new competence which is relevant for their work. In this regard the ASSIST course will improve the possibility of such competence growth.

The SAMO model was developed at an institutional level of the Norwegian childcare system. See figure 1. In this way the model may be characterized as a decentralized curriculum model. The ASSIST model may be said to be developed at a regional level. Still it is an ideal that the ASSIST model conserves the decentralized character of the SAMO model. This is because it is believed that a decentralized model has better chances than a centralized model to adjust to the felt needs for empowerment among the staff in the kindergartens/preschools\(^4\). Therefore it is important that the further implementation of the model in other countries and cities is based on a form of decentralization, giving much room for local reflection and adjustments. What is considered important and “true” knowledge is culturally defined, depending both on the theoretical paradigm and historical tradition. Therefore the ASSIST model does not prescribe a curriculum, defined as textbooks and literature. The ASSIST model is a goal oriented framework curriculum. By defining aims, goals and content some frames are given. But the choice of literature, themes and theories within the classroom teaching is up to much local deliberation.

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\(^4\) Figure and perspectives from: Karseth, Berit, Gundem, Bjørg Brandtzæg & Engelsen, Britt Ulstrup (1993). *Rapport Nr. 4. Om styring og læreplanutvikling*. Pedagogisk forskningsinstitutt, Universitetet i Oslo Pg. 13
Figure 1: “The relative center”:
2 View of learner and learning in ASSIST

In the building of a sustainable and well educated staff in European kindergartens/ preschool institutions, two aspects of theories were selected to support the project to be successful: The human resource perspective and the concept of empowerment. In what follows those theories will be argued and linked to the ongoing project.

2.1 Human resource perspective and Empowerment theory

Within the human resource perspective (HR), education is considered as an investment in the employees, and their “human capital”\(^5\). The human capital consists of all individuals in a setting or an organization. An organization can be defined as what people regard it to be.\(^6\) HR perspective is to see the skills, attitudes, energy, commitment and engagement of people as important resources that are able to develop an organization.\(^7\) This is a fundamental perspective within ASSIST. Viewing the participants in ASSIST from an HR perspective also implies that their opinions and reflections are important to the organization. Investing in competence development is therefore seen as investing in the quality of the organisation and its services.

Empowerment is also a useful perspective to bring in when discussing local development, self governing and to mobilize the strength of people.\(^8\) The historical background of the concept empowerment goes back to Pablo Freire and his action research model.\(^9\) The model sometimes is named “dialogical pedagogy”\(^10\) because what is going to be learned is a co-operative decision.

The notion of empowerment includes a sense of ownership of the process for those who are involved in the developmental change.\(^11\) One starting-point in developing individuals must be to promote motivation in keeping the interest on the specific education. Thus based both on HR theory and empowerment theory, it is of vital importance that the participants experience that their needs influence the ASSIST course. A central way of ensuring this form of empowerment is to allow the participants learning needs give direction to the content of ASSIST. In this regard it is important to always map the needs and interests of the participants every time a new ASSIST course is started. The results from the mapping should influence the choice of themes and course design. In addition it is of vital importance that all the participants are met with an acknowledging attitude, communicating that everyone is equally important.

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\(^10\) Andersson, 2000, pg. 70.
2.1.1 Reflection and learning

Gutièrrez’s\textsuperscript{12} work on empowerment, refers to the individuals contextualizing their experiences and reflecting critically over them. That is to gain a sense of personal power and involvement to join and share experiences with others in order to find new ways to reorganize earlier work. Kincheloe\textsuperscript{13} asserts that theoretical understandings are necessary to the individual’s appropriation of authority to his or her empowerment. He also stresses that empowerment does not occur suddenly because somebody wishes it to do. Instead it takes place when individuals develop the knowledge work skills and pedagogical abilities of the work in a specific setting. Getting such knowledge is providing individuals the skills and resources that enable them to reflect on educational practice.

Reflection has come to be a key concept in Anglo-Saxon pedagogy since the middle of 1980, and has found its inspiration from Donald Schön’s book, \textit{The reflective practitioner}. The reflection concept is descended from the Latin word “reflectere” and is used as a metaphor in human contexts.\textsuperscript{14} Reflection as self reflection aims at the human being to discover her/himself as a person while \textit{reflection as thinking} (cognitive action) refers to the human being meditating, speculating and contemplation over things happening. In that last sense, human reflection is a cognitive act that is taking place over time in order to get a deeper understanding of a problem or an artefact. Reflecting can be applied in the individual’s own setting and be used as how to plan or evaluate activities within the setting.

Reflecting as concept is quite a problematic word to use because it has to be separated from the characteristics that they are not.\textsuperscript{15} Some of those separated categories of reflection that can be useful in a research project as this are: reflection as self reflection, reflection as thinking, reflection as understanding and self reflection from distance but also reflection in acting and knowledge in action.\textsuperscript{16} In the ASSIST project a vital way to reach the developmental objectives is to give opportunity for all participants to critically reflect over their own practice, theories and lectures.

2.1.2 Socio Cultural learning theory

Gutièrrez’ work on empowerment may easily be drawn to the socio cultural learning theory where questions about how people learn are central. The learner is viewed as a co-constructer of his/her knowledge and dialogue and reflection together with other colleagues are at focus in the learning situation.

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A second starting-point for a socio-cultural perspective on learning and human thinking and acting, is to look at how individuals and groups use cultural artefacts, objects or symbols created by humans, in their learning and development process. The cultural artefacts within ASSIST consist primarily of theories and methods presented in the classes.

Interaction between the collective, the individual and the cultural artefacts are in focus.\textsuperscript{17} Within ASSIST those two aspects will be useful. When everyone shares and reflects critically over their experiences and knowledge, the collective knowledge increases. This will offer the members in the group more understanding of different issues.

The collective knowledge that arises then seems to be a key factor for the organization to grow and serve both individual and organizational interests.\textsuperscript{18} This is why a central component in the ASSIST course are the mentoring groups, which focus on collective knowledge growth. The reflection and solution focused mentoring model in ASSIST is an important learning method in generating critical and independent reflection. This model is presented in depth in chapter 3.

How an individual understands his/her work is not only a question of how well that person is doing his/her work. To understand is also connected to the culture of learning and development processes at work.\textsuperscript{19} The way we understand work and work assignments, affect what we observe, give priority to and what we focus on. When understanding what is meaningful and important to one’s work together with others, one of the expected ASSIST goals will be reached; the participants will be better qualified and more motivated when reflecting over theory and practice together. These are the individually short term aims for the ASSIST project. The long term impact for individuals is expected to be more confidence and motivation to take on further training and formalized qualification.

Even if a person has the capacity of learning s/he also usually wants to defend his/her attitudes and views already gained. That can be a difficult problem to solve when individuals meet others in discussions where values and attitudes to certain issues are to be discussed and can prevent a learning process. Bolman and Deal assert that one way of challenging that problem is tailoring the organization of individuals so they are able to both do their work and also to get satisfaction with it.\textsuperscript{20} Organizations need people with competences and energy. On the other hand people need the organization for their inner and outer awards too.\textsuperscript{21}

According to the ASSIST-project those above aspects are quite important to keep in mind when organizing an appropriate course for both skilled and less skilled staff. A crucial idea is to introduce the aims of the project in a proper way and give enough time to everyone within the project to understand the idea the model has and what aims the model want to reach.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Bolman, Lee G. & Deal, Terrence E. (1997).
\textsuperscript{21} See also Fenwick and Bierema (2008) discussing corporate social responsibility and issues for HR development professionals.
3 Reflection and solution focused mentoring

Reflection and solution focused mentoring\(^\text{22}\) seeks to help employees/students to think through their foundation of knowledge, experiences and values. Becoming more conscious of one’s own knowledge base increases the possibility of changing and developing this knowledge base. This reflection model includes challenging the participant’s knowledgebase, and giving impulses to developing it further. The classes given in the ASSIST course form a common reference for such impulses in the group.

Mentoring which is reflection and solution focused is in large a cognitive model where the intention is to get a hold of the thoughts behind the participants actions. These thoughts can be based on: Theory, experience and assumptions. We may call these thoughts which give direction to our actions; Practical theories. Handal and Lauvås have developed a model which illustrates the link between our actions and our practical theories\(^\text{23}\).

Figure 2: “The practical triangle”

\[^{22}\text{The reflection and solution oriented model is inspired by two complimenting theoretical perspectives. The focus on reflection on practical theories is originally developed by three Norwegian educationalists: Gunnar Handal, Per Lauvås & Kirsten H. Lycke. Their work is referred to in: Zeichner, Kenneth, M. and Daniel P. Liston. 1996. Reflective Teaching. An Introduction. Lawrence Erlbaum associates, Publishers. Mahwah, New Jersey. In the ASSIST model we have also been inspired by a secondary source about reflective mentoring: Asta Birkeland & Nina Carson: 2004. At the same time we have developed the latter material even further within the ASSIST model. The solution oriented perspective is developed by Gro Langslet 2002.}\]

3.1 Problem verses solution focused mentoring

All social phenomena inhabit aspects that are functional, and aspects that are dysfunctional.\(^{24}\) The question is what aspects of this reality do we choose to focus on as teachers, mentors and mentorees\(^{25}\)? Our language affects our understanding and feelings about experiences. Problems are easily reinforced if we use a problem focused language. Actions that are given attention tend to be repeated. It is believed that the wanted changes happen quicker by searching for and investigating what is working well, rather than finding out what is not working. Therefore it is more constructive to lead conversations towards what we want, rather than what we don’t want. It is important not to misunderstand the solution focused perspective, thinking that “one may only talk about what is positive” and problems are neglected. Problems are the starting point. But instead of only analyzing possible reasons for the problem, one focuses on analyzing functional ideas and practice. One is especially searching for:

1.) What the person/staff already is/are doing and has done to handle the problem.
2.) Dreams or wishes about change.
3.) Situations and periods where the problems are smaller.

Beneath we have listed questions which point out the central difference between a solution focused perspective, and a more traditional problem focused perspective:

| Central differences between a problem focused and a solution focused perspective: |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| **Problem focus**               | **Solution focus**               |
| What are the problems?          | What do you wish? How may you know that your problems are solved? |
| What are the reasons for the problems? | What is already happening that we want? When are our problems smaller or gone? What are we doing differently then? |
| Why are we not succeeding?      | Why do we succeed with what we succeed? |
| What has become worse?          | What has become better, in spite that something has become worse? |
| Why has it become worse?        | Why has it become better?        |
| Who is guilty of things getting worse? | How have we managed to create Improvements? Who has done what wisely? |


\(^{25}\) In the following a person who is being mentored will at times be referred to as the mentoree.
3.2 The 6 phases of mentoring

Beneath you see a linear presentation of a mentoring process. In practical life, a mentoring session will not look exactly like this. At the same time a linear presentation gives a clear picture of the different phases of a mentoring session, which are believed to promote reflection over theory and practice.

3.2.1 Preparation

**External preparations**
We differentiate between preparations on an inner and an external level. The external level of preparation implies that the mentor conversation should be well planned in terms of a clear appointment, with a timeframe of about 45-50 minutes, and booking of a room where the conversation may be carried out without interruptions. An inner level of preparation implies mental preparations for both the participants and the mentor.

**Inner preparations for the mentor**
Participate actively in class and reflect on relevance for working life. Secondly it is important that the mentor reads the preparational notes from the participants beforehand and reflects on what questions or perspectives may be useful to generate critical and solution focused reflection.

**External and inner preparations for the mentorees**
Participate actively in class and reflect on relevance for work life. Secondly the The participants must think through: What would I like to talk about and reflect on in the mentor group? The participant must write down some questions/ themes and send to the mentor before the group meets. Research has showed that the written preparational note is a prerequisite for a

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successful mentoring session. In chapter 8.1 you will find some points to consider when writing a preparational note.

3.2.2 Involvement
Being involved means participating both mentally and emotionally throughout the mentoring session. Giving supportive verbal and nonverbal feedback to the mentoree is therefore central.

3.2.3 Exploration
In a mentoring session it is important to firstly take the role of an attentive listener. Take time to understand the questions, reasoning and reflections of the mentorees. The group and the mentor ask questions to deepen their understanding of the challenges at stake.

3.2.4 Critical and solution focused reflection
At this point the role of the mentor and the other participants is to give impulses into the dialogue which may help the group to reflect critically and independently over practice and practical theories. This will imply giving impulses towards exploration of practice and practical theories from various theoretical and ethical perspectives. Solution focused questions will also give important impulses to promote learning and development.

The mentor must not be afraid to answer questions and give advice at this point. Yet it is not the primary role of the mentor to answer all questions, but to stimulate the ability of the group to reflect independently and explore various ways of thinking and practice. The mentor’s ability to be critical of her/his own practice and thinking, raises the chances that the reflection process also will promote a critical attitude towards established theory and practice.

3.2.5 Meta conversation
A meta conversation is a conversation about the content of the conversation and what the participants learnt from it. In addition the meta conversation is about how the mentor and mentoree experienced the mentoring session and how they may improve the mentoring session next time.

3.2.6 Final reflections
After the mentor has finished the mentoring session she/he should take time to reflect on the following questions: How did this mentoring session develop? Was I a good listener? Did I give useful impulses into the session which made the mentorees reflect critically? What can I learn from this and what should I change next time?

4 ASSIST aims

In regard to kindergarten/ preschool institutional staff with little or no higher education the aims are to:

1. Increase their perspectives and consciousness about: Life long learning and minimum 2 additional ASSIST themes.

2. Increase their ability and routine of reflecting critically over their own and others underlying practical theories at work.

3. Increase their ability and routine of doing focussed and systematic observations at work.

4. Increase their ability and routine of using observations and stories of practise in order to reflect critically and learn from practice at work.

5. Increase the frequency of learning from success/ failures at work.

6. Share what they have learnt to other colleagues in formal and informal settings at work.

7. Increase their work motivation.

8. Improve the attractiveness of being a pre school assistant.

9. Increase their motivation to take a higher degree as a preschool teachers.

10. Decrease sick leave.
5 ASSIST themes

On the basis of the mapping of training needs among potential participants in workpackage 1, the themes chosen out in ASSIST received the most attention. Since the target group of the ASSIST course is staff with little or no higher education, it is their needs which have been in focus when choosing the ASSIST themes. This priority is in line with the earlier mentioned human resource and empowerment perspective in ASSIST. The potential participants were staff in municipal kindergartens/preschool institutions the following districts/cities:

1) Sagene District, City of Oslo (Norway), 2) City of Dortmund (FABIDO)(Germany), 3) Milano (Italy), 4) Amaroussion (Greece), 5) Motala (Sweden) 6) Tjörn (Sweden).

If other themes than those chosen out in the ASSIST model are preferred, the users of the model must make such local adjustments, within the minimum requirements which are explained under 5.1.

1. Introduction to ASSIST- life long learning.
2. Communication with children, parents and/or colleagues.
3. Meeting the needs of all children /Cooperating partners.
4. Learning through interaction.
5. Child neglect and abuse/ Cooperating partners.
6. The organization you are working within.

5.1 Minimum requirements in an ASSIST course

All ASSIST courses must include the first introduction session. In addition all ASSIST courses must include minimum two of the remaining themes. Within theme: 2, 3 and 4 there are various subthemes which one may choose from. In relation to each theme in ASSIST, there is either a small written task or a practical task. The participants should perform a task related to the theme taught in class. The tasks in the ASSIST model may be adjusted to local needs.

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6 Themes, outcomes and tasks in ASSIST

6.1 Introduction to ASSIST - life long learning perspectives

During the first classroom teaching, the mentors and mentorees should be taught about reflection and solution focused mentoring. In addition they should also receive some teaching about collecting and using observations and stories of practice as helpful documentation for critical reflection over practice. The ASSIST course plan includes theory on these themes in chapter 7.

The teaching session should both involve theoretical teaching and practical training. The latter should be organized within the mentoring groups. This will function as a good preparation and motivation before the first real mentoring session. The practical part of the training should be a session where the mentoring group experiments with using the reflection and solution oriented mentoring model, using practical stories and observations as focal theme. Reflection and solution focused mentoring and the use of documentation and reflection may easily be linked to life long learning perspectives.

Outcomes
Obtain a preliminary understanding and practical training with the learning forms used in ASSIST:
- Reflection and solution focused mentoring.
- Observation and stories of practice.
- Practical theories.

Tasks
Task a: Write down expectations to yourself, the group and your mentor in relation to the mentoring group. Share these with the others.
Task b: Think of a situation at work where you learnt something important which has had influence on your later work. Share this experience with your mentoring group.
Both task a.) and b.) are to be done by all participants.

Mentoring group
This time the mentoring group gathers during the second hour in order to talk about expectations and train on reflection and solution focused mentoring.

Small written task to be done after class
Write down a story of practice which made you reflect critically over communication in your institution.
The story of practice should involve some element of: adult-child, child-child or adult-adult communication.
6.2 Communication with children, parents and/ or colleagues

Communication and knowledge about group dynamics are important when working with children. A main focus is how to make the social interaction in the children’s groups work in a good way. From a professional perspective communication in this sense is a question of how to build trust, a feeling of security, care and understanding.

Good communication with parents concerning the child is essential, especially when it comes to difficult topics where the staff should be able to handle both “closeness and distance”.

This theme deals with questions concerning how to create better cooperation with colleagues and between departments of a childcare facility. From a communicative perspective such an improvement can be based on peer group tutoring. This implies that the assistants have the possibility to reflect and learn through dialogue about work related topics within a framework of solution oriented focus and professional ethics. A communicative improvement takes its departure from a collective understanding of what kind of function the organization is supposed to supply the society in general and families in particular. As follows such a collective understanding needs a collective frame of references. The strength of the ASSIST-project and in-service-learning is the possibility to, through peer group tutoring, contribute with mutual frames of references and in turn a collective understanding of different kind of tasks within the organization. For example, a deepened collective understanding might contribute to better communication about how to organize work, set up new routines and a better clarity in the division of responsibilities.

Common Outcome
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- Communication and acknowledgement.

Outcome for communication with children
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- How do various views on children affect communication?
- Developing a healthy group dynamic.

Outcomes for communication with parents
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- How to create good parental cooperation and communication in order to improve the relationship with parents in everyday practise.
- Resource oriented attitudes towards parents.

Outcomes for communication with colleagues
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- What characterizes good cooperation and communication?
- The importance of sharing reflections over practice.
- Constructive conflict resolution.
Task related to communication and children
Write down a dialogue between a child and an adult in your institution. Analyze the dialogue from the theoretical perspectives which were taught in the class.

Practical task related to communication and parents
Analyse your parental relationship which is working the least well in your compartment. Use what you know and what you learnt about communication and conflict handling in class, in order to make a written plan and implement 1 or 2 strategies to improve this relationship. Write a story of practice in order to reflect on the relationship between your intentions, actions and results.

Or:
Take a degree of responsibility in planning and leading a part of a parent meeting. Write down a story of practice from the meeting and reflect on the relationship between your intentions, actions and results.

Task related to communication and colleagues
Analyze your relationship with a colleague which did/does not work very well. Use input from the class to either: Analyze what you did to make it work better, or: Plan and implement a strategy to support you in improving this relationship. Reflect over the relationship between your plans, actions and results.

6.3 Meeting the needs of all children/ Cooperating partners
This is a theme which deals with questions about values and attitudes as well as practical work with all children in the centre. Both values and practical work have a foundation of general knowledge about special needs. There could also be a discussion of what is in the concept of “special needs”. In seminars this question could be viewed on from different angles. To do that more general knowledge about special needs is required. “Special needs” are related to mental and physical health as well as to social factors.

The importance of supporting ethnic minority children’s bilingual development is also emphasized here. Consciousness of role modeling in the daily routine of the kindergarten/ preschool institution is also important. The theme “To meet the needs of all children” can also be connected to the theme 6.4: “Learning through interaction”.

Common outcomes:

- The philosophy of segregation, integration and inclusion of children with and without reduced functional capability.
- Facilitate learning.
- Working with cooperating partners.
Outcomes related to children with reduced functional capability:
- Increased perspectives and consciousness about 1-3 themes below, or others:

  Children with reduced functional capability in regards to:
  - Adhd.
  - Autism/Asperger syndrome.
  - Cerebral palsy (CP).
  - Language impairment.
  - Hearing impairment.
  - Visual impairment.
  - Diabetes.
  - Asthma and allergies.

Outcomes related to bilingual development:
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- How to facilitate bilingual development for ethnic minority children.
- The important role of the first language when acquiring a second or third language.

Task related to children with reduced functional capability:
Choose at least one of the tasks below. Choose the one which is the most challenging for you, and which is possible to follow through in practical terms.

Observe and give a written description of how a child with reduced functional capability interacts with children, adults and the physical environment. Based on what you know and what you have learnt from the class - write some points about what you believe are important steps in facilitating learning and development for this child.

Or:
Observe and give a written description of successful ways in which the staff facilitated learning and development for a child with reduced functional capability. Use the theoretical perspectives from the previous class when analyzing your work. Include also a description of how the staff worked and cooperated with others in order to map the child’s reduced functional capability.

Practical task related to bilingual development
Choose a bilingual child which you consider to have relatively poor language skills. Observe the child in interaction with the physical environment; toys, staff, parents/ and or children. How does the environment support this child’s language acquisition? Write down two stories of practice which illustrate how the environment is supporting this child’s language development.

Make a plan where you include your reflections of how the environment may support the child’s language acquisition even better. Discuss the plan with your colleagues and implement 1-2 suggestions. Use theory from the lecture explicitly in your analysis and planning. Write a story of practice after the implementation and reflect over the relationship between your intentions, actions and results.
6.4 Learning through interaction

Learning is a process of interaction between more competent others and cultural artefacts. Cultural artefacts may both be physical; such as toys, nature and computers. In addition we have symbolic artefacts such as language, numbers and music. Children learn in both informal and formal settings. Children’s instinctive wish to play may provide them with many important informal learning situations, especially when adults are aware and supportive. Based on children’s interests and needs, adults may in addition plan and organize formal learning situations. The aim of such learning situations may vary; from developing children’s creativity, physical skills, social competence, group dynamics and or language skills.

The increase of children in many kindergarten/preschool institutions creates challenges for the staff to manage a group during the day. The staff is looking for new ways to organize their everyday practise in larger groups.

Outcomes
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- Learning through various forms of play and interaction.
- Various ways of organizing and managing large and small groups in relation to learning activities

Content
The group chooses 1-2 of the following themes:
- Music
- Children's literature
- Drama
- Natural science
- Physical education
- Mathematics
- ICT

Practical Task
Write down 2-3 stories of practice which document some common group interest. Organize a learning experience which seeks to develop their interests and competence. Seeks also to improve the children’s group dynamic to some extent.

The learning situation should be:
Motivating and interesting for all the children participating
Document and reflect over what was positive and what may be improved another time.
6.5 Child neglect and abuse/ cooperating partners

Facilitating learning and development both involves consciousness about children’s physical and mental needs. Consciousness of child neglect and abuse signs, may lead to early intervention in children’s lives. The kindergarten/ preschool may also serve as a proactive helper in vulnerable family situations. In this way the staff serves as important role models in relation to what is a healthy lifestyle. In the same way the institution may also reflect healthy values in relation to nutrition, physical activity, communication and conflict resolution.

Outcomes
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- Child abuse and neglect.
- Knowledge about cooperating partners and how to cooperate.

Task
Write down a story of practice about a child which you/ your leader suspect/suspected is/was being abused or neglected to some degree. Include what you/ your colleagues are doing/did to give the child a satisfying and professional follow up.

6.6 The organization you are working within

Many employees know too little about the organization of the kindergarten/ preschools. What are the different levels of the organization, and which responsibilities are connected to the different levels? Another important point is knowledge about various cooperating partners in the childcare field. Three areas are of especial importance: The working environment, the working process and professional ethics. These themes may also be integrated with several of the other themes in ASSIST.

Outcomes
Increased perspectives and consciousness about:
- The different levels in the organization and their responsibilities.
- Present challenges and reflections.

Task
Make an interview guide and interview a colleague with a different area of responsibility than yourself.
7 Learning methods in ASSIST

7.1 Classroom teaching

The main source of theoretical input comes from the classes taught in the ASSIST course. Evaluations of the SAMO model have indicated that a dialogical character of the teaching context promotes the participants learning and reflection. Giving room for group discussions and plenary discussions, during a teaching session is often highly valued by the target group of ASSIST.

It is advisable to seek to use a variety of communicational means in the ASSIST model. To all of the themes it may be inspiring to use videos, role play, sound recording, pictures, cartoons etc.

It is also recommended that the teacher gives handouts to the learners, including some central issues and a list of references.

Classroom teaching is characterized by more dialogue than a traditional lecture. Evaluations of the SAMO model have indicated that a dialogical character of the teaching context promotes learning and reflection for the participants. Giving room for group discussions and plenary discussions, during a teaching session is often highly valued by the target group of ASSIST.

7.2 Observational orientations

As a follow up of the previously mentioned classroom teaching, the ASSIST model involves giving the participants certain tasks, as described in 5.1. Although the tasks are different, almost all of them imply using systematic observations and writing down stories of practice. Observation and stories of practice are important documentation forms which are helpful tools to use reflecting over and developing a professional practice.

Depending on what the observations are going to be used for, one must choose what observation orientation is the most useful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating</th>
<th>Non participating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unspecific</td>
<td>Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsystematic</td>
<td>Systematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participating observations
Participating observations imply that you interact with children and/ or colleagues, yet you are observing and taking carefully note of what is happening.\(^\text{29}\)

Non participating observations
Non participating observations imply that you don’t participate in interactions with children and/ or colleagues. Instead you observe and take carefully note of what is said and done. This is on one hand the easiest way of observing, yet it may be difficult for the children to accept you taking this role. It is recommended that you talk with the children in advance explaining that you are very interested in all the wonderful things they are saying and doing, and that you want to observe, listen and write some of this down. In relation to the observational tasks in the ASSIST model you will be able to freely choose to do either participating or non participating observations. It is recommended that you try both types of observations during the course.

Unspecific observations
The everyday observations of children and colleagues may be characterised as unsystematic observations.

Specific observations
When observations are focused towards a specific issue, skill or theme the observations may be characterised as systematic. The tasks in the ASSIST model are always asking you to take systematic observations. For example after a lecture about communication you will be asked to take observations of the communication forms at your workplace.

Unsystematic Observations
When observations are done without an intentional purpose, and are not followed up over time and are not analysed afterwards, we may call this unsystematic observations.

Systematic
Over time one chooses to focus on a specific theme, collecting various forms of observations about an individual or a group. Such systematic observations may be used when making further decisions about learning level and learning needs.

Qualitative
In depth insight about one or few individuals. All of the ASSIST tasks may be related to qualitatively oriented observation methods.

Quantitative
Observing what many people are doing/ saying about a limited issue or within a limited time frame.

Not mutually excluding orientations
These are called observational orientations, because these are not forms which are mutually excluding. For example one may choose to do a non participant observation. During this

sequence some children might come up to you to speak to you, transcending the observation sequence into a partly participatory orientated observation session. This is okay. One may still say that you are doing non participatory orientated observations. Some also believe that when one is conducting qualitative oriented observations, one must not count, because this is typical of quantitative observation forms. Again it is important to underline that these are observational orientations which are not mutually excluding.

### 7.3 Stories of practice

Self made stories by adults and children about the kindergarten/ preschool institution. The stories portray limited situations which are presented detailed and personally, the way it was experienced by the storyteller. The story is therefore never neutral. A central criterion of a story of practice is that it has a message which generates critical reflections over practice.

**Why write down stories of practice?**

Writing is in general an important tool for thinking and learning. When you write you clarify for yourself and others what your thoughts are. Writing down your perceptions makes it easier to share and discuss them with others. In addition writing is a prerequisite for documenting and evaluating practice. Therefore writing is important in relation to a professional practice.

### 8 Three forms of Reflection and Solution oriented mentoring

All the mentoring sessions within ASSIST are in groups. When each member of the group comes with their questions and reflections to the mentoring session, it is often helpful to formalize the structure of the mentoring session. Beneath you will find a presentation of how the mentoring sessions may be structured to ensure that everyone gets to share their reflections through a structure with a clear progress. The ASSIST model consists of three slightly different mentoring forms. These are:

1. Mentoring after a class
2. Mentoring before an ASSIST task.
3. Mentoring after a Practical task.

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8.1 Mentoring after a class

Preparation note from mentoree should include:

- Expressions, models, examples etc. which were taught in the class which I would like to clarify or discuss.
- Story of practice which is relevant to the theme taught in the class. This may be the same story of practice as you wrote for your small written task, or other relevant story of practice.
- Relevant educational questions which arise from your story of practice.

8.1.1 Concepts from class

The group discusses critically and clarifies all questions and comments from the class. Clarification and critical discussion on all topics, expressions, models etc. related to the latest class. The mentor writes down the reflections throughout the session.

8.1.2 Presentation and choice

As earlier mentioned, the person who is being mentored is referred to as the mentoree. Each participant gives a short presentation of their story of practice and their questions. The mentor notes down each of the stories on a flip over. The group, including the mentor, votes to decide which story of practice they are going to discuss. It is important to choose the story of practice which you think is the most relevant and contains many options for reflection and solution focused discussion.

8.1.3 Elaboration on challenge

The mentoree who owns the experience which receives the most votes elaborates more on the context and challenges of the story of practice. Others may not interrupt at this point.

8.1.4 Questions

Now the rest of the group may try to understand the story of practice in more depth, through questions and answers. Each of the participants may ask one question at a time, and the mentoree answers.

8.1.5 Underlying practical theories

Each participant must now reflect on what may be underlying practical theories in the story of practice. This deliberation should involve critical reflection concerning the relationship between concepts taught in class and practical theories in the story of practice.
8.1.6 Solution focused reflection
Each of the participants must now be challenged to pose at least one solution focused question to another participant. This implies that all of the participants also will be challenged to reflect around minimum1 solution focused question in light of the story of practice, and related questions deriving from the story.

8.1.7 Learning potential
Each of the participants must now reflect on how the reflections from the mentoring session may be useful in other situations.

8.1.8 Summary and closing discussion.
The mentor summarizes the reflections. The mentor may now initiate a more general discussion on the related theme/lecture.

8.1.9 Meta conversation
The mentor now asks the participants: How did they experience the group today? What did they learn? Any suggestions to improvements next time?

8.1.10 Final reflections
When the mentoring session is completed the mentor should take time to reflect individually on the following questions: What is my impression of this mentoring session in relation to the intentions with reflection and solution focused mentoring? Was I a good listener? Did I give useful impulses into the session which made the mentorees reflect critically? What is my opinion of the suggestions from the participants? What can I learn from this and what should I/we change next time?
8.2   Mentoring before a practical task

8.2.1 Preparation note
1. Questions to clarify task
2. Questions to discuss suggestions how to approach the task
3. Questions to raise theoretical and ethical aspects of the task

8.2.2 Consultation
Each mentoree gets to raise their questions concerning their interpretation and suggestions as to how to handle the task. Both mentor and mentorees may answer questions. From this point of, the mentoring session continues as described under “Mentoring after lecture”.

8.3   Mentoring after a Practical task

8.3.1 Preparing for mentoring after a practical task would imply thinking through/raising questions like:
   1. The practical work theories which gave directions to my actions (Theory, experience, values)
   2. What did I succeed with and why?
   3. Alternative theories/experiences, ethical values which could be used to see and act differently in a related situation next time.
   4. In what ways may my experiences and reflections be of value for myself and other participants in the future?

8.3.2 Organizing principle
It is important that all the participants get an equal chance to share and reflect on their experiences after a practical task. Learning from experience requires active reflection. Therefore we do not suggest that the group votes and focuses on only one experience after a practical task. Instead the mentor must plan the time in such a way that the experience of each participant is given attention after a practical task. In this model we suggest that there is a continuous exchange between individual sharing/reflection and group discussion. More practically we suggest the following procedure:

   1. One mentoree shares his/her reflections according to point 1 and 2 above.
   2. The group, including the mentoree and the mentor reflect on issues related to point 3-4.
   3. The next mentoree shares his/her reflections according to point 1 and 2 above
   4. The group, including the mentoree and the mentor reflect on issues related to point 3-4.
   5. Continue like this until all participants have shared and reflected on their experience.
   6. Closure.
8.3.3 Each of the participants share their reflections concerning:

1. The relationship between my intentions, actions and the results.
2. The practical work theories which gave directions to my actions (Theory, experience, ethical values).
3. Past or present example of success with a situation related to the same type of challenges as related to the task.

8.3.4 After one participant has shared, the group, including the mentor and the mentoree comment on:

1. Alternative theories/ ethical values which could be used to see/act differently in a related situation next time.
2. In what ways may this experience and reflections be of value to the rest of the group?

8.3.5 Closure

1. Related themes which are interesting to discuss in the group.
2. Relevant questions, themes which may be interesting to bring from this mentoring session to the lecture on the related topic?
3. Evaluation of mentoring session.

9 Administrative body

9.1 Local Leader group

Should consist of the leader of the district/ organization, a coordinating leader for the course and 4-5 coo leaders.

It is important that the local leader group finds practical solutions for the implementation of the ASSIST model which provide a supportive structure for the participants. In order to do this the local leader group must collaborate closely with the leadership within each kindergarten/ preschool institution. For example it is recommendable that the participants are allowed to take the same time off from work which they have spent on classroom learning, if this occurs outside regular working hours. In addition it is recommendable that the mentoring sessions are held during the regular meeting hours of the compartment. It is also important that the kindergarten/ preschool institution allow the participants to perform ASSIST tasks during work time.

The mandate of the local leader group is to facilitate the practical implementation of the ASSIST course and evaluate the course in relation to learning and further development. If the classes are held in the evenings, it is very important that the local leader group takes a practical responsibility in relation to preparing a small snack and ensuring that the technical devises are working etc.
Lastly the local leader group should ensure that the mentors receive training and follow up in their role. It is strongly recommended that the leader group facilitates minimum three gatherings which are only for the mentors. These may be organized: Before start up, midway and at the end of the course.

9.2 **Reference group**

The aim of reference group is to:
To spread the project to other branches/offices/authorities
to ground the model and the project
To reflect on and develop the course

Suggestions to people who may join the reference group:
Representatives of universities/educational institutions
Public authorities with decision making power
Leaders who are not part of the project
Union representatives
Representatives from associations in the child care sector
Representatives of the project

9.3 **Cooperation with Early childhood College/ University**

The local leader group of ASSIST should have some level of cooperation with one or several Early childhood college/university. Primarily to ensure that the teachers receive mentoring when preparing their classes. Secondly through cooperation within a reference group.

9.4 **Teachers**

The teachers in ASSIST are employers within the institution who is organizing the ASSIST course. The teachers have some degree of theoretical and practical expertise on the theme they are asked to teach about. In addition they should be given some follow up by a teacher at an Early childhood college or University.

9.5 **Mentors**

A mentor must be an educated preschool teacher. Alternatively s/he should have other corresponding higher pedagogical education. The mentor leads a group consisting of participants who work in other kindergartens/preschool institutions than her-/himself.

One leader with preschool education from each of the participating kindergartens/ preschool institutions must also participate in the mentoring group. This leader is responsible for bringing minimum two of the themes from the ASSIST course up on the agenda in the whole kindergarten, using participants at the ASSIST course as resources.

9.6 **Mentoring group**

A mentoring group consists of about 8 participants, from 2 different kindergartens/ preschools.
This contributes to wider exchange of experiences and learning. The participants who come from the same kindergarten/preschool should have their daily work in the same compartment. This improves the chances that their learning processes will be transferred to their institution.32

# 10 ASSIST course design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What:</th>
<th>How many times:</th>
<th>Suggestions to when:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teaching</td>
<td>7 times</td>
<td>After work for 21/2 hour, October-April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>10 times</td>
<td>During regular meeting time at work for 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small written task</td>
<td>4 times</td>
<td>At work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical task</td>
<td>3 times</td>
<td>At work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare mentoring</td>
<td>10 times</td>
<td>At work/home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11 References


OECD (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_39263231_37416703_1_1_1_1,00.html


